



Behind the Moroccan Terrorist Connection: State Policies and Saudi

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Theme: Contrary to what is usually believed, a survey by the Pew Research Center indicates that religious intolerance and radicalization is wide and deep in Moroccan society.

Summary: The involvement of Moroccans in most major terrorist attacks in the world during the past two years has shattered Morocco's image as a moderate, democratizing monarchy. While this can partly be blamed on the effects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Moroccan authorities are also to blame for fostering institutionalized religious intolerance and for providing all sorts of facilities for the importation of the most literal, rigorous and inflexible form of Islam: the teachings of the followers of Muhammad Ibn Abdel Wahhab (fl. 1750s), who provided religious legitimacy to an otherwise tribal monarchy in Saudi Arabia. Radical and violent groups in the Muslim world draw on this tradition. Judging from the involvement of an unusually high number of Moroccans in terrorist attacks, it is safe to suggest that the Wahhabi Islam is more widespread than we think.

Analysis: The involvement of Moroccans in virtually every major terrorist attack in the world during the past two years has shattered Morocco's image as a moderate, democratizing monarchy. While the implication of young Moroccans in international terrorist networks is worrying, it should surprise no one. While the international context provides an explanation, Morocco's domestic policies are largely to blame for this problem.

Certainly, there is a growing perception in Morocco and elsewhere in the Muslim world that Western countries, the US in particular, are hypocritical. They talk about the Arabs' and Muslims' authoritarian inclination when in fact, for decades, they defended and supported local despots. They condemn Islamic terrorism while they tolerated violence against Palestinians and now Iraqis. Daily television reports on the beatings, humiliation, assassination and destruction of private Palestinian property since the first Intifada have angered Muslims who blame the 'West.' The recent assassination of Abdessalam Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, in his wheelchair coming out of a mosque will further radicalize public opinion in the region from Morocco to Pakistan. Continuing violence in Iraq and the growing perception that Iraqi lives do not count for much is exacerbating hostilities towards the US and its allies and consolidating support for Osama Bin Laden. A recent article in the Boston Globe gives some chilling figures about what is going on in Iraq. Since the US invasion of Iraq there has been no reliable official report on civilian casualties, yet more than 10,000 people might have been killed. The manner in which the occupation authorities handle compensation of Iraqi civilians who have been injured or who have lost a family member reflects a lack of sympathy. Despite declared efforts to compensate civilians, the US military has rejected some 5,700 of the 11,300 claims filed by families. Total compensation to Iraqi families has been US\$2.2 million or US\$393 per

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Iraqi victim. By contrast, the families of American victims of 9/11 are receiving an average of US\$1.8 million per victim. None of this, of course, justifies rising religious hatred or suicide bombings. But the perception that the lives of Palestinians and Iraqis are worthless under occupation is a major source of radicalization in the Muslim world. Bin Laden does not need to make a great effort to recruit; individuals and groups seek him or act under his banner even if they might never have met.

Yet the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the occupation of Iraq explain only one part of the problem, and perhaps not the most important one. The Moroccan authorities' responsibility in fostering intolerance is unmistakable, even if inadvertent. Despite official claims to religious tolerance and pluralism at the highest levels, the Moroccan state has allowed and institutionalized religious intolerance. Here are some trends and numbers to illustrate the state's passive complicity.

Religious Intolerance

The Moroccan authorities' official denunciation of the political manipulation of religion by extremists is hypocritical. Since independence, the monarchy and public authorities manipulated religion to legitimate political power, discredit liberal and leftist groups, and reproduce ideological relations of domination. Morocco's laws, constitution, educational policies and management of the religious sphere contribute enormously to the spread of religious intolerance. One major consequence is the stifling of any serious debate on the role of religion in public life and suppression of any efforts aimed at an Islamic reformation. Religious education and content therefore remained archaic and susceptible to ideological manipulation. School textbooks are full of harsh and confrontational religious references (such as *jihad*, *rida*, *kuffar*, *ghazw*, etc), as if Islam were essentially a religion of war and hatred. There is hardly any positive mention of other monotheistic religions, and no attempt to address Morocco's pre-Islamic history. During the last twenty-five years, Morocco's modern universities produced more than 30,000 Islamic specialists. Most graduates get jobs that pay very little or find no job at all. In addition, thousands more graduate each year from traditional religious institutions such as Dar al-Hadith al-Hassaniya, al-Qarawiyyine, and some 500 private and public theological schools throughout the country. With an antiquated religious training, no job prospects and no credible secular institutions, it is hardly surprising that unemployed university graduates and youths in general use Islam as a means to contest what they perceive as a corrupt and unjust political authority.

In parallel to these disastrous policies, the Moroccan state provided all sorts of facilities to import the most literal, rigorous and inflexible form of Islam: the teachings of the followers of Muhammad Ibn Abdel Wahhab (*fl.* 1750s), who provided religious legitimacy to an otherwise tribal monarchy in Saudi Arabia. Ideologically, Moroccan forms of Islam, both official and popular, are incompatible with Wahhabism. But for political and financial reasons, Morocco allowed Saudi religious figures to finance a large portion of Morocco's 35,000 mosques in Tangier, Casablanca, Fez, Sale, Marrakech and Tetouan. According to Antoun Basbous, who investigated the Saudi funding of religious institutions in Morocco, 70% of Casablanca's mosques were built with Saudi money. Around each mosque, networks of missionaries headed by *emirs* began to form, calling on Muslims to join *jihad* abroad (Afghanistan, Bosnia or Chechnya) and advocating the principle of *al-amr bil-ma'ruf wa-nahyu 'ani al-munkar* (enjoining what is proper and forbidding what is reprehensible) at home. Written pamphlets, cassettes, CDs and videos were openly distributed to advocate *al-amr bil-ma'ruf*. Only later –following the 16 May suicide bombings in Casablanca– did the Moroccan authorities realize the power of this religious principle.

The Principle of 'Enjoining What is Proper' (al-amr bil-ma'ruf)

Indeed, Islamic political groups in the Middle East and North Africa, whether advocating religious preaching through peaceful *da'wa* (missionary work), or aiming at the violent overthrow of authority through *jihad* (holy war), justify the establishment of *al-dawla al-islamiya* (Islamic state) on the principle of *al-amr bil-ma'ruf*. The moral dimension and significance of this principle in giving credence to the Islamic protest movements in the region has largely escaped the attention of analysis specialists. Yet while Islamic leaders speak frequently against social inequalities and economic poverty, it is in the wider context of commanding the good and forbidding what is immoral that they legitimate political action. They posit themselves as the guardians of a entire moral order, not just of economic equity and social justice.

Al-amr bil ma'ruf is often interpreted as the duty of every Muslim to censure immoral conducts, and correct it right there and then, with force if necessary. For many fellow Muslims who do not necessarily share the Islamic groups' literal interpretations of the Qur'an, the formula is seen as a source of religious despotism, lawlessness and violence since it authorizes every Muslim to correct what he perceives as reprehensible. This is becoming a particularly salient problem in countries where Islamic groups command widespread popular support, and attacks on individuals who do not conform strictly to the prescriptions of *al-shari'a* are increasing.

It is therefore important to understand the scriptural origins of this principle and its manifestation in daily life. The Qur'an admonishes Muslims to exercise this duty in *Surat Âl 'Umrân* stating: 'And there may spring from you a nation who invite to goodness, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency. Such are they who are successful.' (3:104) And 'Ye are the best community that hath been brought for mankind. You enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency; and ye believe in God.' (3:110) In *Surat al-Hajj*, the Qur'an relegates the duty of *al-amr bil ma'ruf* to the rulers, and places it on the same level as two other fundamental Islamic commandments, prayer and almsgiving: 'Those whom we entrust with power in the earth, must be steadfast in prayer, give alms, and enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong' (22:41). Although the principle could be understood as admonishing Muslims to preach the word of God to non-Muslims (5:15-16,78-79), it came largely to be interpreted as organizing the internal affairs of Muslims on the basis of Islamic teachings. Most references to *al-amr bil ma'ruf* appear in fact in verses or chapters revealed in Medinah (Âl 'Umrân, al-Ma'ida, al-A'râf [163-170], al-Tawba, al-Hajj); Medinah being the first established Islamic state where the rules of *shari'a* could be fully implemented after God had completed his message.

The Function of Political Authorities

In an Islamic state, this duty, especially with regards to the use of force to enforce religious morality in a public place, was historically relegated to the government. While practiced earlier, the institution came to be known as *hisba* since the early ninth century. In this official sense, *hisba* describes the function or office of the person (*muhtasib*) commissioned with the supervision of public moral behavior. This function was performed by a state official particularly in markets (known earlier by the name *sahib al-suq*) to enforce commercial transactions on the basis of Islamic moral standards with regards to usury, fraud, hoarding, quality of produce, safety, cleanliness, etc. In this context, the *muhtasib* had to have certain qualifications in order to perform what was considered primarily a religious duty. In addition to being a man of moral integrity, the *muhtasib* had to be a learned man in Islamic juridical matters and experienced with commerce and market operations. As a moral economic principle therefore, the *hisba* was performed by a carefully chosen representative of public authority, which rendered *al-amr bil ma'ruf* in this narrow sense a theoretical obligation only, or a *fard kifaya*. In other words, when the principle is vested in the hands of public authority, it is no longer binding on every Muslim to exercise it.

But in the presence of an unjust ruler who does not govern the Muslim community according to *al-amr bil ma'ruf*, the question of the individual Muslim obligation to change *al-munkar* wherever he sees it, and the extent to which force should be applied, is subject to various interpretations. A famous *hadith* of the prophet says: 'He who sees something reprehensible, let him correct it with his hand. If he is unable to do so, with his tongue. If he can't, with his heart; and that is the minimum of faith.' Another prophetic *hadith* leaves open the possibility of dissident resistance against a ruler who does not administer justice implied in the Qur'anic concept of *al-amr bil ma'ruf*: 'The most excellent of the martyrs of my community is someone who stands up to an unjust imam, enjoining him to do what is proper and forbidding him from what is reprehensible, and is killed by him for that.' In Islamic history, *shi'i* protest movements in particular, have often used the principle of *al-amr bil ma'ruf* to advocate the overthrow of unlawful Muslim rulers. The Kharajites, Ismailis and Zaydites adopted the principle as one of their major slogans to justify armed rebellion against unlawful conduct of rulers and to contest objectionable application of *shari'a*.

Even in *sunni* doctrine, however, where the prevention of *fitna* (civil war) among Muslims is considered a top priority, and the use of force against an unjust ruler is rarely approved, the obligation of every Muslim to practice *al-amr bil ma'ruf* is affirmed. The strongest and clearest confirmations of this principle in sunnism are to be found in Ibn Hanbal (d. 241/855) and al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111). Ibn Hanbal upholds that commanding what is right and correcting what is wrong by heart is an act of devotion. While Ibn Hanbal does not appear to recommend the use of force, he considers manual action, including the breaking of wine containers, game instruments and music devices a higher virtuous act. In a well developed section of his *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (The Revivification of Religious Sciences), al-Ghazali provides perhaps the most radical interpretation of *al-amr bil ma'ruf* in sunnism. He defends it as the most important pillar of Islam—established by the Qur'an, Sunna, and consensus— but that had wrongly become a forgotten obligation. While al-Ghazali considers this duty a *fard kifaya*, he holds that it is incumbent on every Muslim to exercise it without asking the permission of the ruler. That obligation includes the founding and arming of guerrilla groups, or what he calls *tajyish al-juyush*, to enforce *al-amr bil ma'ruf*, even at the risk of starting a civil war.

Radicalism in Morocco

Radical and violent groups in the Muslim world draw on this tradition. Judging from the involvement of an unusually high number of Moroccans in terrorist attacks, it is safe to suggest that the Wahhabi, a rigorous form of Islam, is more widespread than we think. Here are some disturbing indications.

The Pew Research Center published in March 2004 the results of a survey it conducted in nine countries among some 8,000 people to assess public opinions one year after the occupation of Iraq. Pew is a Washington-based, independent opinion research group that studies attitudes toward the press, politics and public policy issues. The survey included four countries from the Muslim world: Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan and Turkey.

In Morocco, Pew conducted 1,000 face-to-face interviews of adults between 18 and 59 years of age in predominantly urban areas (Rabat, Casablanca, Fez and Marrakech) during 19-24 February 2004. Some of the items included in the survey focused on religious tolerance such as attitudes towards Jews and Christians and the moral justification of using violence for political purposes. If the poll's questionnaire is rigorous and the sample size reasonably representative, the Morocco survey shows two alarming results: an unmistakably growing trend of religious intolerance and wide support for suicide bombings.

The public authorities in Morocco and perhaps in neighbouring European countries should be worried about the following findings:

The first concerns the popularity of Osama Bin Laden. According to the survey, 45% of Moroccans view Bin Laden favourably.

Second, despite growing support for the US-led war on terrorism (Moroccans' support for the US anti-terrorism campaign grew from 9% in May 2003 to 28% in March 2004), 60% of surveyed Moroccans said that suicide bombings against American and Western targets in Iraq are justifiable.

Third, the survey finds that substantial majorities in Morocco hold negative views on the other two monotheistic religions: 73% of Moroccans viewed Christians unfavourably and only 2% held very favourable opinions. The ratings are worse with regard to Jews: 92% of Moroccans held unfavourable views and only 1% held very favourable views of Jews. In Pakistan and Turkey, in comparison, unfavourable ratings of Christians and Jews are lower than in Morocco. In Pakistan, unfavourable ratings for Christians and Jews are respectively 62% and 80%. In Turkey, unfavourable ratings for Christians and Jews are respectively 52% and 49%. In other words, despite official discourse, Morocco may have one of the lowest scores on religious tolerance in the Muslim world.

Conclusion: If Pew's findings are reliable, they indicate that the process of religious intolerance and radicalization is wide and deep in Moroccan society. Yet, political actors remain indifferent. Recent talks of reviving the Democratic Kutla to address Morocco's political crisis signals that Moroccan political elites do not realize that what are needed are bold, serious reforms, not the usual backstage deals. And the Monarchy's calls for religious tolerance and pluralism must be backed by concrete legal, constitutional and political reforms. Otherwise, repeated calls for tolerance sound hollow and look more and more like a public relation stunt for outside consumption.

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